



## Column Amy Domini

Founder and CEO of Domini Social Investments and author of several books on ethical investing. amydomini.com

# Localism takes hold

**ONE OF THE TRULY HUMILIATING EXPERIENCES OF** aging is getting to see just how wrong you can be. I was a big fan of David Korten's book, *When Corporations Rule the World*, when it was first published in 1995. So when it was reissued in 2001 with new concepts added I bought and read it at once. My response: "God bless the man; he is a hopeless dreamer."

How wrong I was. In his re-released edition, Korten argued that only a vibrant and concerted movement to celebrate and support locally owned businesses could sustain a healthy economic life for most of us. He wrote that although large corporations are good at selling a lot of a product, they squash the neighborhood vendors and fail to provide the local basketball teams with bus money. I agreed with that much. But what I could not envision was that people would shift their habits to support locally owned businesses and locally sourced products. That just seemed too farfetched.

But this is a new world, and localism, as it is called, has taken hold. As I pass a farm stand in South Carolina, the "certified South Carolina produce sold" sign urges me in. As I walk to the subway stop in my neighborhood, I pass five "locally owned and operated" signs in windows. In Kentucky, I see "Kentucky Proud" signs to announce the local nature of the business inside. Even at the large chain supermarket where I shop, "locally grown" signs loom over vegetables.

This is an important trend. We always had the tourist who insisted on Maine lobster or Vermont maple syrup to enrich their traveling experiences, more as a memento than a movement. This is something else. The shopper at the locally owned pharmacy is saying that they get it, that they choose to support the local family that has, in turn, been serving the community, supporting the local elementary school spelling bee and keeping the developmentally disabled son of a neighbor employed stacking shelves. And if the toothpaste costs 20 cents more (simply because the local pharmacist

can't benefit from scale the way the majors can), the customer doesn't see it as a rip-off but as a fair trade.

Some years ago, I wrote about the slow food movement, wherein advocates urge us to source locally, organically and humanely. They are asking us to prepare traditional recipes and to take the time to enjoy the meal. I wrote that it was a subversive trend. While it was fun, it taught us about what it was not, and it was not industrial agri-business. It helped remind us that there was something precious in the simpler, older ways. Like slow food, localism teaches us something about what it is not. It teaches us to look more broadly at the ecosystem within which we get goods and services and to shop in ways that more directly lead to the creation of communities in which we want to live.

Localism seems to have taken hold because it speaks to something fundamental about the way humans want to live. We want to feel as though we are part of a community, whether it is our block in the big city or the rural county we call home. Our communities offer resources to finance our lives, that allow us to enjoy dignity, common respect and companionship with our shopkeepers, our public servants and our neighbors. These resources don't easily grow out of minimum wage jobs at big box stores, but they are immediately tangible at the local market where we stop and chat about the new stoplight in town while we pick up a carton of milk.

As I think about the larger implications of localism, I see nothing but positives. It isn't like being a fan of your hometown team, fostering resentment and competition. Localism in South Carolina isn't better or worse than localism in Massachusetts. I enjoy the shared commitment to community that localism means everywhere I find it. Rather than fragmenting us, going local seems to be a way of making us all part of something big.

I keep hoping I'll become wise enough to recognize a great thought when I see it, but I'm still waiting. Meanwhile, I'll have to satisfy myself with a quiet apology to David Korten for ever having thought he was a fluffy, softhearted soul instead of the visionary that he is. ■

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